



ARCHIVES OF IT – LESSONS FROM TECH

Oral Histories of IT and Tech

ARCHIVESIT.ORG.UK

LEARNING FROM HISTORY

In 1948, Winston Churchill pointed out to the House of Commons, ‘Those that fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it.’ (He was paraphrasing, in fact, George Santayana from his book *The Life of Reason* published in 1905, who noted that those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.)”

Does the history of the IT industry to date offer lessons for the future?

If so, what can we learn?

The stimuli for this discussion are thoughts from interviews in the Archives of IT

But we hope the audience can add other ideas and conclusions

WHAT IS ARCHIVES OF IT?

AIT is a registered charity, founded in 2015 by Roger Graham OBE to record, raise awareness of and encourage the study of information technology and how it has changed our lives

Archives of IT is a free-to-use and expanding online resource of interviews from leading people associated primarily with the UK IT and Telecommunications industry

The online resource also includes teaching resources, in-depth features, research, digital exhibitions and donated publications

CAPTURING THE PAST, INSPIRING THE FUTURE

Our emphasis is on the oral history of personalities, their background, successes and challenges.

We capture this through video and audio interviews and complement them with in-depth features and research projects as well as company reports and other media.

AIT is distinctive in concentrating on the personal views, ideas and experiences of those who built and worked in this important activity, while other archives and museums are focused on preserving physical devices and working machines

BUILDING ON THE INTERVIEWS — WEB CONTENT

- 250 interviews with scientists, engineers and entrepreneurs
- Publications: a collection of industry publications kindly shared by Archives of IT interviewees. They include weekly and monthly periodicals, annual reports, research documents and in-depth analysis dating back to 1972.
- Research: One of our key aims is to encourage academics and students to use the free archive for their research into IT. We also commission research projects such as our History of Human-Computer Interaction report published in September 2023.
- News, features and blogs: short, industry news stories and more in-depth features on topics reflecting our interviewees' specialism: eg recently these have included AI and Supercomputers.

DISTILLED AS CROSS INDUSTRY THEMES



Current Developments

Find interviews, blogs and other resources from Archives of IT about current developments in IT and Tech, and subjects that are in the news such as AI, Quantum and autonomous vehicles.

[Find Out More](#)



Tech for Good

Scientists, technologists and medics talk here about how they've used computing data and communications in medicine to understand more about biology and develop new Tech, making a real difference to people's lives.

[Find Out More...](#)



Entrepreneurs and investment

Interviewees and bloggers discuss what it means to be an entrepreneur, and how this kind of investment has benefitted the development of tech and the economy.

[Find Out More...](#)



Modernising industry

Watch interviews with people involved with IT and tech modernisation of government and industry, and discover archives that document this fascinating progress.

[Find Out More ...](#)



Science and engineering

Discover more about the application of IT to research and development, and how industry policy has affected the progress of Tech.

[Find Out More ...](#)



The Networked Society

A selection of interviews and blogs showing how increasing connectivity through Tech is transforming society, business and the way we live our lives.

[Find Out More ...](#)



Security

Find out more from our archives about tech achievements in security and defence, and the role IT has to play.



Diversity and Inclusion

A selection of interviews from our archive talking about diversity and inclusion in the IT and tech workplace



Iconic Companies

Some companies stand out as pivotal to the development of the industry. Many of our interviewees worked in those businesses and through them



Government

At AIT we have interviewed a wide range of people working in IT and tech, from local government to special advisors. Click through to find out more about how IT has shaped government in the UK.

[Find Out More ...](#)

WHAT CAN WE LEARN?

- Amongst 250 interviews, 400 hours of chat, 30,000 pages of text, it is difficult to distil a winning formula for tech business.
- But there are some recurring themes that help

1. THE UK TECH SECTOR IS A WINNER

- The UK tech industry is a success story.
- Better to be in the UK Tech industry than not in the Tech industry. It's a great place to do business and has been since LEO was the first commercial stored programme digital computer in 1951.
- Centers of excellence led global innovation – Manchester and Cambridge Universities developed early computers, UCL and Post Office led Internet and mobile technology, Silicon Fen has grown some great Oaks from Acorns
- We have a huge community of tech industry that fuels other business
- London is the best place in the world for inward investment in tech
- <https://media.londonandpartners.com/news/london-leads-the-way-for-international-tech-investment-over-past-decade>

2. THE MARKETS UNDERVALUE GROWTH

- Eg See interview with Sir Martin Read, CEO Logica on shareholder attitudes and valuations and John Higgins in his role at Digital Europe
- UK shareholders don't have the appetite to grow an Apple or a Google: maybe because the European Market is fragmented (John Higgins)

3. BUT UNICORNS ARE VALUABLE

- But you don't have to have a giant market capitalization to be successful.
<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/kemi-badenoch-heralds-thriving-1-trillion-uk-tech-sector>
- In 2022 the UK became just the third country in the world to have a tech sector valued at \$1 trillion, with more 'unicorn' billion-dollar tech startups being created than Germany, France and Sweden combined.

4. (DON'T RELY ON) PREDICTING THE FUTURE

- As Niels Bohr said, “Its difficult to make predictions – especially when they relate to the future”
- We asked Profs Lord Mayor Michael Mainelli and Jim Norton to look back at Butler Cox Reports from 30 years ago and see how good we were at advising CIO's on industry trends.
- <https://archivesit.org.uk/blog/mirrors-of-the-future/>
- <https://archivesit.org.uk/blog/back-to-the-future/>
- Industry experts got some big issues right but totally underestimated the impact of the developing Internet,
- They spotted the demand for video data services but not how they would be delivered (mobile)
- The moral is don't bet the bank on one idea of future technology

4. FAILURE IS A KEY STAGE IN SUCCESS

- Multiple entrepreneurs (incl Tom Ilube, Andy Phillipps, Richard Little) contrast attitudes to failure in USA and UK
 - Andy Phillipps (Active Hotels / Booking.com) learned what the market wanted with the first abortive attempt, “ *selling hotel rooms to the American audience but realised that US tourists really only visited London, Oxford and Cambridge, while Active Hotels was selling rooms in Blackpool, Scunthorpe etc.*” But it worked out in the end, “ *...described as “the best acquisition in internet history” and is believed to be the most profitable ever in the digital travel market. Today, Booking.com’s market cap exceeds \$50 billion, employs over 10,000 people and processes 100 billion dollars of bookings in 220 countries.*”
- Tom Ilube ...

5. RIGHT SECOND TIME

- Richard Little (Braid and Century Tech) says
 - *“My route to success was, having got everything wrong first time, my philosophy became to get it right second time, not to even worry about getting it right first time. We launched Braid with the wrong product but we got it right when we discovered what was wrong with it. This has become almost the background to agile programming; you iterate. Nowadays, it’s become much more systematised, but in those days it seemed like I was inventing this. Don’t over-research things, get out, do it, get it wrong, correct it.”*

6. YOU HAVE TO BE IN THE GAME

- Andy Phillipps (again) asked about his success rate, says:
 - *“It’s almost exactly what the industry statistics would suggest it is, which is deeply depressing because I always hope that I’m better than everybody else and that I can go in and make investment more intelligently. The cliché is always that angel investing is a power law game and all your returns are made from two or three investments out of 50. In material terms, it’s probably slightly more than that, but really not very much more, but, I probably have 50 per cent or so that have or will go bust, another 30 per cent will survive, and then all the returns come from the 20, ten, five per cent long tail, which make really disproportionate returns.”*

6. WHO DID IT — THE GRAMMAR SCHOOL BOYS

- Historian Dr Sam Blaxland (UCL London) looked at the postwar generation that founded the industry
 - *“What is so striking about the development of the IT sector, and more specifically those that led this proliferation in the early post-war decades, is that, on the whole, they were not rooted in one of the higher social classes. Unlike so many aspects of public life, the business world, law, the civil service, politics and academia in this period, which remained stubbornly connected to an established group of more middle-class individuals, the IT sector was very different. Its newness, and the fresh-thinking and talent it required, meant it drew in people whose fundamental qualities were intelligence and innovation — something not related to social class. In other words, it was close to a meritocracy.”*

7. WHAT ABOUT THE WOMEN IN IT?

- An enigma
 - Numerically and influentially important in early days
 - Mary Berners Lee, Grace Hopper, Katherine Johnson, Karen Sparck Jones
 - Declined in numbers
 - Discriminated against
 - But hugely important in their contribution to the industry
 - Steve Shirley (and successor, Hilary Cropper)
 - Vin Murria
 - *Asked if the high proportion of men in IT ever put her off, Vin says: "If I'm brutally honest, I never took any notice of it. I was so focused, I had no idea that it was an issue. Looking back on it, it was probably at the time a massive advantage." On her third day of work at Kewill, Vin was told that she would not be successful because there were three things wrong with her: she was Asian, young and female. She says: "Whenever I meet that person now, I say, 'Guess what? I've fixed one of those.' I'm not so young any more.*

CONCLUSION

- The UK tech sector is a great place to do business / invest and make money
- Don't expect to get it right first time
- Stick with it if you want to get rich
- Its game of chance
- Spread your bets if you are an investor or be prepared to fail more than once if you are an entrepreneur
- Success is about what you know and desire to win – without regard to gender, social class or ethnicity
- What is your formula for success???

WOULD YOU LIKE TO GET INVOLVED IN AIT?

- Help us learn more about the industry
- Be interviewed and share documents
- Write a thought piece or blog – lead the discussion
- Volunteer time to transcribe an interview or help with digital curation
Donate funds
- Sign up to our newsletter, follow us on social media